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ABSTRACT

This pamphlet describes library paraprofessionals, answering the questions: (1) What are library paraprofessionals? (2) What do paraprofessionals do? (3) How can you become a library paraprofessional? (4) What is the job market for library paraprofessionals? and (5) How do you find a job as a library paraprofessional? Work in all types of libraries is considered. Included in the description are a list of sample library technician courses, references, and a source for further information. (KP)

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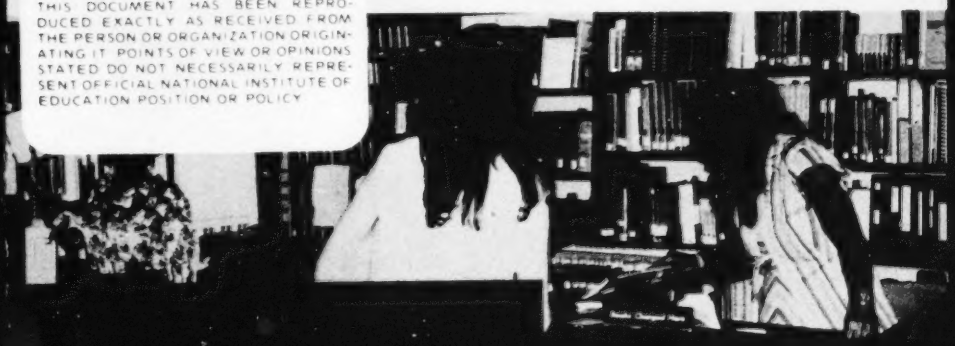

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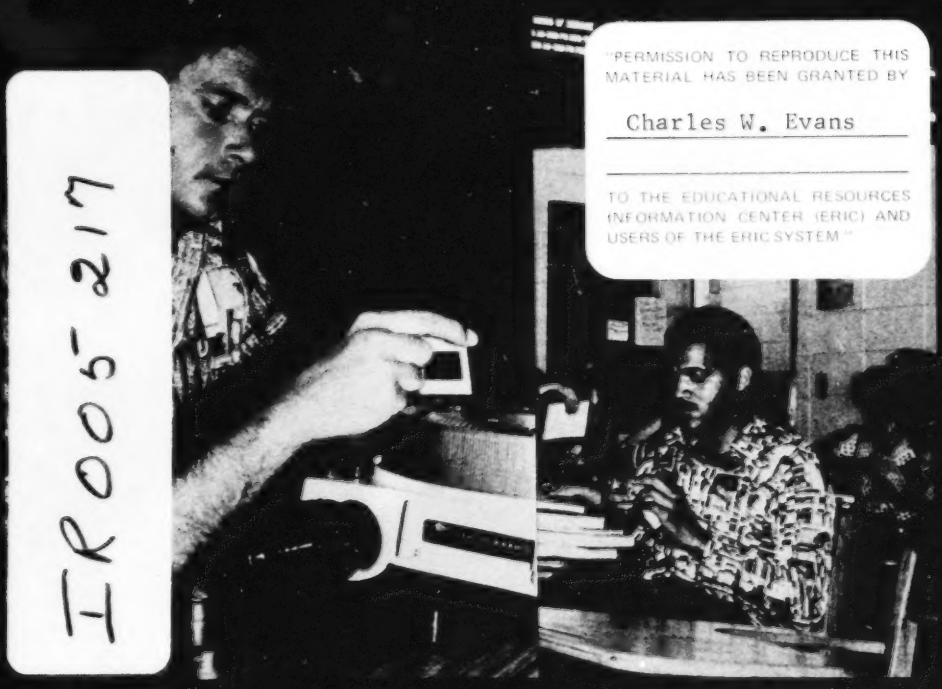

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Paraprofessional Library Employees

Prepared for the Council on Library/Media Technical-Assistants
by

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Libraries are vital links in the communication chains that bind our society together. Their importance is growing, like that of other information-related institutions, and with this growth their need for personnel is increasing, especially at the paraprofessional level. Consequently, libraries offer paraprofessional employees many opportunities for productive career employment. An unpublished study by the U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics forecasts that the number of paraprofessional library employees in the United States will be 77 per cent greater in 1985 than it was in 1970[1].

What are Libraries?

Libraries (including media centers, information centers, educational materials centers, documentation centers, culture centers, and other similarly-titled agencies) are organizations that help people to obtain knowledge from existing sources. The word *library* comes from *liber*, the Latin word for *book*, but books are not the only type of knowledge source that libraries use; they must be prepared to draw upon any type that exists. Today, libraries are being severely tested by the proliferation of audio-visual, electronic, and microform media for the storage of knowledge, and of new media for the reproduction, organization and transmission of knowledge. New skills and greater expertise are necessary if these new media are to be utilized properly, and one of the most practical ways for libraries to acquire these skills and expertise is through the employment of properly-qualified paraprofessional personnel.

What are Library Paraprofessionals?

Library paraprofessionals work with, and under the direction of professional librarians, who plan and direct the operation of libraries. (*Paraprofessional* in this usage, means "beside the professional.") Clerical employees also support Librarians, but these are not considered paraprofessionals. They include secretaries, typists, and others with

office-related skills. Since their work is essentially the same in libraries as in other organizations, they do not need to be specially trained for library positions. Paraprofessionals are distinguished from these clerical employees (even though they may do some clerical work) because most of the work that they do is unique to librarianship. Library paraprofessionals do need special training because their work is unlike that in non-library zations.

Library paraprofessionals are known by many different names. Each library uses it own class titles and position titles for paraprofessionals, and titles used by one library do not necessarily correspond with those used by another. In the past, paraprofessionals were called *Library Clerks*, but this led to confusion with true clerical employees. They also have been called *Library Attendant, Library Assistant,* or *even Assistant Librarian*.

In 1970 the American Library Association attempted to standardize titles by assigning titles to categories of library personnel. The titles it adopted for the paraprofessional categories were *Library Technical Assistant* and *Library Associate*. [2] These titles were assigned to very broad classes, defined primarily by the years of schooling required for entry. (*Library Associate* required a bachelor's degree and *Library Technical Assistant*, two years of college-level study.) These titles now are widely used, but have been modified by many libraries -- and by the American Library Association itself -- by adding the word *media*, or by substituting *media* for *library*, to form *Library/Media Technical Assistant* and *Media Technical Assistant*. Generally speaking, however, the title that appears to be most used is *Library Technical Assistant*. In practice, it often is applied to all paraprofessionals, without regard for their years of schooling.

Another important paraprofessional title is *Library Technician*. This is the general series title (Series GS–1411[3]) for paraprofessional positions in government libraries that operate under federal civil service regulations. This very detailed classification list types of work that are appropriate for paraprofessionals and tells how their work differs from that of Librarians or clerical employees. Everyone interested in paraprofessional work in libraries should examine a copy of this series.

What Do Paraprofessionals Do?

The work that paraprofessionals do in libraries is work that has been done in the past by Librarians, and may be still in very small li-

braries. Because of this, Librarians sometimes disagree over whether or not a specific task is professional or nonprofessional. Actually, paraprofessionals can do any work that meets these two criteria:

1. It is work that can be planned in advance, so that paraprofessionals can be taught how to do it.
2. It is work that is done in sufficient volume so that the benefits gained by the library from its assignment to paraprofessionals outweigh the costs of training and supervision by Librarians.

The volume necessary to meet the second criterion is more often found in large libraries than in small. This explains why the ratio of paraprofessionals to Librarians is likely to be larger in big libraries than in small ones, and is one reason that demand for paraprofessionals should grow as libraries grow larger.

Some of the work that paraprofessionals do is simple enough to master quickly through brief in-service training and practical experience. For example: reshelving books, charging and discharging materials lent to borrowers, and maintaining serial records. Other types of work range from the simple to the complex, so that paraprofessionals may begin without prior training and gradually develop expertise on the job. Book repair is an example; it may be as simple as taping a torn page in a current novel or as complex as the restoration of a priceless manuscript. Still other work (like the cataloging and classification of books) requires much special training before the worker is ready even to begin his or her employment. Until the development of special college-level training programs for library paraprofessionals, all work of this type had to be assigned to Librarians because it was not economically practical for libraries themselves to give paraprofessionals the necessary training.

The work that paraprofessionals do in libraries may be classified in several different ways. It may be divided into that which is mainly mechanical or manual, e. g., processing new books, or maintaining and operating audio-visual equipment; and that which is primarily intellectual, e. g., bibliographic searching. Or it may be divided into three classes, each containing both mechanical and intellectual tasks: 1) work that focuses on -- like story-telling or staffing an information desk -- which requires special skill in communication; 2) work that focuses on one or more types of knowledge media and its supporting equipment, e. g., motion-picture film projectionist; and 3) work that focuses on library procedures, like acquisitions, or serials record maintenance.

Because there are so many different types of library work that paraprofessionals can do, there is no single pattern for the division of work that all libraries follow. Most often, however, libraries are divided into three departments: 1) Administration, 2) Public Services, and 3) Technical Services. Paraprofessionals may be employed in all three. In Administration, they may serve as administrative assistants, compiling statistics and keeping records. This work requires a close association with library executives but, often, very little contact with books or with library users. In Public Services, paraprofessionals must work with library users, and most often must be able to use the library and its resources. In Technical Services, paraprofessionals help to build, organize and care for library resource collections, but have very little direct contact with library users. In libraries that use these three divisions, the use of paraprofessionals is likely to be least in Administration, and greatest in Technical Services, but Public Services offer the greatest opportunity for the expansion of paraprofessional employment in the future.

In some libraries, paraprofessionals must be generalists who can shift easily from one type of work to another and may even do some clerical work. The essential quality in such an employee is versatility. With some skill in all types of library work, such a paraprofessional can assist the Librarian of a small library (where he or she may be the only assistant) in everything that must be done, and even can keep the library operating whenever the Librarian must be absent. In other libraries, paraprofessionals are specialists, each concentrating on a single class of work (one of the classes listed above) or even on a single type of work within a class, e. g., one might be an audiovisual media specialist while another might specialize in microforms exclusively. Such specialists are not versatile, since they are not necessarily qualified to move from one type of work to another, but they should be much more expert than paraprofessionals who are generalists. Indeed, they should be more expert in what they do than Librarians are. Specialists are most valuable in large libraries where expertise is essential and the depth of a large staff obviates a need for versatility.

There is still another type of work that paraprofessionals may be called upon to do as they advance to higher positions within the library hierarchy: supervise other employees. In many libraries today, paraprofessionals head departments (e. g., circulation or serials departments) that are staffed by paraprofessional personnel.

Trained paraprofessionals also may find employment in organizations that are related to libraries. These organizations include schools

-- e. g., as language laboratory assistants -- bookstores, book and media wholesalers, publishers and printers, and library supply houses.

How Can You Become a Library Paraprofessional?

No matter what type of library work paraprofessionals choose to do, they all need special skills. You can develop these skills in two ways: 1) through in-service training and practical experience on the job; or 2) through formal training in a library technology training program. The first of these is appropriate for very simple tasks with few skill requirements. For most library work, however, on-the-job training is a slow and uncertain method for learning, and for some library work it is completely inadquate.

If you are planning a career as a library paraprofessional, get all of the formal training you can, even though it may not be essential for your first job. Training will enable you to qualify for more different jobs, in more libraries, and it will help you to compete successfully against other applicants. Training also will help you to advance faster to positions with more responsibility and higher pay. Many people cannot afford the costs of such training on a full-time basis, but most schools schedule their library technology courses so that students can combine their studies with work in local libraries.

Most library technology training programs are offered by junior or community colleges, or by vocational schools. Usually they consist of a combination of library skills courses and general education courses that are particularly relevant to library work, designed to be taken (on a full-time basis) over a two-year period. This list of library technology courses offered by Cuyahoga Community College, in Cleveland, Ohio is typical.[4]

680-101	Introduction to Library Resources and Services	3 qtr hrs
680-121	Technical Services I	3 qtr hrs
680-151	Technical Services II	4 qtr hrs
680-240	Bookcraft	qtr hrs
680-252	Readers' Services	4 qtr hrs
680-260	Introduction to Childrens' Services	3 qtr hrs
680-261	Story Telling	qtr hrs
680-270	Circulation Control Systems	3 qtr hrs
680-280	Internship	4 qtr hrs

680-290	The LMTA and the Special Library	qtr hrs
535-101	Introduction to Audio-visuals	3 qtr hrs
535-102	Organization of Audio-visuals	3 qtr hrs
490-280	Data Processing for Libraries (OCLC)	4 qtr hrs

No two programs are identical, because each is designed to meet the special needs of libraries in its own service area. For example, some specialize in the work required by a single type of library, while others emphasize work with audio-visual materials. However, most programs include an internship or practicum course to give their students some first-hand experience in an operating library.

If you are interested in a paraprofessional library career, your first step should be to locate one or more of these programs and to communicate with the director(s). The best way to do this is by using the Council on Library Technical-Assistants' *Directory of Institutions Offering or Planning Programs for the Training of Library Technical Assistants*.[5] which is available in libraries. The latest edition of this book lists 157 training programs in the United States and Canada. It should be available in most libraries, or copies may be purchased from COLT for $7.00.

What is the Job Market for Library Paraprofessionals?

Federal libraries offer excellent careet opportunities in paraprofessional library work -- as Library Technicians -- with a starting salary of almost $8,000 per year for applicants who have two years of college preparation. Apart from federal employment, the job market for library paraprofessionals varies from one locality to another. It depends on the needs and personnel policies of local libraries, local salary rates for comparable work, and the supply of job applicants generated by local training programs. The easiest way to find out what this market is like is to ask the director of the local training program. It is a part of his or her job to be familiar with the demand for library employees in his or her area, the skills that are most needed and the salaries that are being offered. The director should be willing to advise you, even though you are not one of his or her graduates, as a professional courtesy. Many who are his or her graduates will need similar help from others!

Where there is no local training program, the only way to discover the state of the job market is to visit libraries and enquire. This is time-consuming, but visits to libraries often lay a foundation for future employ-

ment. Often, too, it is easier to find a job in areas where no local training program is producing competitors for every vacancy.

How Do You Find a Job as a Library Paraprofessional?

Training and job-hunting should go hand-in-hand, and your study of job prospects should begin even before your training. Otherwise, you may find that you have acquired skills for which the demand is already filled. Conversely, if, while you are a student, you know where you will be working and what you will be doing after graduation, you can tailor your studies to fit your job. This will help you to be more successful and progress more quickly.

Study library technology in the same geographic area in which you plan to work, if you can, because most training programs are designed to meet the special needs of nearby libraries. If you must study in a school that is distant from the library or libraries that you want to work for, find out from them what they need (the director of your training program probably will not have this information) and make sure that your training will provide it.

If you are looking for a job, visit prospective employers if you can. Librarians respond much more favorably to a personal interview than to a letter of inquiry. But do write for an appointment before your visit, and send a letter of thanks afterward. (If the person you talked with made any verbal promises, mention them in the second letter just to refresh his or her memory.) If you are facing any significant competition from other job seekers, don't be choosy. Visit every library you can and consider every opening. Sometimes very fine opportunities for employment can be found in what seem to be unlikely places. Also, Librarians often exchange information about jobs and applicants and know of opportunities in other libraries. Even though a Librarian has no position to offer you, he or she may help you by telling you of an opening in another Library or by telling another Librarian about you.

References

[1] Kahl, Anne. "Bureau of Labor Statistics Library Manpower Study," *Bowker Annual of Library & Book Trade Information*. 20th Ed., (New York: Bowler, 1975), p. 284.

[2] "Library Education and Manpower," *American Libraries* 1 (April, 1970), p. 342.

[3]U. S. Civil Service Commission, *Position Classification Standards.* "Library Technician Series" GS–1411. (June, 1966).

[4]Taylor, Richard L., ed. *Directory of Institutions Offering or Planning Programs for the Training of Library Technical Assistants.* n. p. Council on Library Technical-Assistants, 1976. p. 65.

[5]*Op. cit.*

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Where Can You Get More Information?

The Council on Library Technical-Assistants (COLT) is an international association of people and organizations who are interested in the training and employment of paraprofessional library employees. Its membership includes library employees, students, educators, professional organizations, schools, and libraries.

For additional information, write:

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